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THE OUTLOOK FOR OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

By PROFESSOR W. G. JORDAN,
Queen's University, Kingston, Can.

ONE who studies the Old Testament sympathetically according to modern methods can say, sincerely and cordially, that the outlook for a more rational interpretation of that great literature is exceedingly hopeful. When, however, we seek to give a reasoned justification of this statement, we find that our embarrassment springs, not from the poverty of our material, but rather from the richness of our resources. As we shall see, the biblical criticism which has come to increased efficiency during the nineteenth century, and which many have feared as a destructive force, has multiplied our material largely, and has given to things that seemed to be small a great and abiding significance. In one short essay we can simply touch the fringe of this great subject, but we can at least attempt to handle it in such a way as to show the spirit of the critical movement and the direction along which it has run its course.

I.

The nineteenth century has not been, as many imagine, limited to the "present and practical," and, indeed, real science does not acknowledge these misleading labels and arbitrary divisions; hence large areas have been added to this, as well as to other spheres of knowledge and realms of research. There are people, with considerable pretensions to culture, who think that it is a stupid, short-sighted policy to spend so much of one's time over languages that are called "dead" and over literatures that arose in the distant past. From that point of view it may seem somewhat perplexing that precisely in the last century, which we knew to be so living and modern, many able men have

spent their strength and skill in bringing to light languages and literatures which were supposed to be, not only dead, but doomed to everlasting forgetfulness. But, as a matter of fact, the life of man has during the last hundred years been widened in many directions; if the century was an age of specialisms, it was not itself narrow or special, but rather a movement of large universal range. We cannot now discuss the full significance of this fact, but, confining our attention to the particular subject in hand, we venture to say that languages which continue to live and exact a powerful influence in spite of our laziness and prejudice can hardly with correctness be counted among the dead things. Indeed, is anything dead in God's great world except the man who fails to respond to the inspiring influences which stream to us from so many quarters? Our divisions are superficial and our labels confusing. If it is a scientific business to dig up a fossil and show its place in the scale of being, it is surely a gain to science to unearth a language which enables men to write a new chapter in the history of humanity. Whatever, then, may be our own particular pursuit, we should be thankful that some are allured into special paths of investigation which have no attraction for us, and we should recognize that they as well as ourselves are helping to complete the grand scheme of things. The man of largest culture would today hesitate to appropriate Lord Bacon's words, "I have taken all knowledge to be my province;" but even if we are called to work in a limited department, we can attempt to pursue our special work in a large, liberal spirit.

As to the Hebrew language, the character of Old Testament studies during the past century has been such as to render it more than ever necessary that those who would form a first-hand judgment upon the historical, literary, and theological problems which are now forced upon us should have an accurate knowledge of the original tongue. There is no need to regret this, or to apologize for it; the "Semitic revival" of the nineteenth century has been remarkable, and cannot be ignored; it has brought with it increased knowledge of the structure and spirit of the particular group of languages to which Hebrew belongs,

so that the claim can now be made with all seriousness that as a mental discipline and means of culture the study of these languages is not to be despised. The labors of great grammarians and lexicographers have made available, not only a wealth of material, but also such illuminating principles that a really scientific method is possible. We are not shut up to a dreary collection of details, but may take a comprehensive view of one of the great creations of the human mind. A really great language shows how a particular people looked out upon life and viewed the varied things with which men have to deal; to pass over into a different family of languages and appreciate the modes of thought of a people whose genus was so different from that of the western mind requires an effort that must be beneficial to those who make it scientifically and sympathetically.

We might go back to the Greek school of early Christian interpreters and find indications of striving after a scientific method; or we might point to slight and sporadic manifestations of the critical spirit before the Reformation; but in a brief review it is both appropriate and advantageous to confine our statements to the century which has just reached its close. Speaking broadly, we may say that a great movement in Old Testament criticism has run its course within the nineteenth century, and that in recent years vigorous efforts have been made in applying and popularizing the results thus gained. We must, then, dismiss in one short sentence what is worthy of an elaborate discussion by saying that the Reformation gave the impulse and the nineteenth century worked out the method. The result is that, while changes have been brought about, and new interpretations given which can be understood and appreciated by any man of average intelligence, a technical science has also been developed which demands, like every other science, real, patient, and continuous study. The complicated processes of such a science are not fit subjects for pulpit exposition, but they lie back of the preacher's work as a valid science lies behind every real art. The artist must know anatomy, though he never paints a skeleton, but sets before us the fair human form clothed in graceful drapery. The doctor must

have studied anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and other sciences, but he does not visit the sickroom for the purpose of lecturing on the structure of the body or the functions of its organs. In like manner the work of the preacher will be more effective if behind his intelligent teaching and passionate appeals there lies careful consecutive work upon the literature which, as a rule, forms the basis of his discourse. Further, many men who find their vocation in the Christian ministry have, in addition to the pastor's sympathy and the preacher's popular gifts, a real scientific interest; and, without undervaluing excursions into other realms of knowledge, we may rejoice that there is a prospect that this side of their mental life may find some measure of satisfaction in the sphere of theology and biblical criticism.

The more one makes an effort to realize how much the nineteenth century has contributed to make possible a real understanding of this ancient people and its sacred literature, the more is this thought forced upon us that the greatest tribute to the power and significance of the Old Testament is the immense and varied work that has been lavished upon it. It would be a most hopeless thing to regard all this toil as the outcome of skepticism and vanity, a huge specimen of perverse ingenuity and misdirected effort. Contributions have been made by scholars in the leading nations of the world and from all shades of Christianity and Judaism; many men have worked from intelligible and valid principles of historical and literary study; they have checked or confirmed each other's results; and, as a whole, we may claim that they have been inspired by love of the truth. This movement has not been exempt from the rule that no great thing comes to humanity or the church without struggle and agony; not without pain have men cast off traditions that had been woven into their very life; not without sorrowful conflict have they sought to make sure that in setting aside outworn forms of thought no vital truth should be lost. When a man once gains even a glimpse of what this noble army of workers, not lacking in martyrs, has accomplished, he sees that by its very nature it must remain to the great crowd "an unconsidered miracle," but none the less it is to the special student a magnificent

tribute to the unexhausted and inexhaustible spiritual influence of the Old Testament.

II.

The nineteenth century has applied to the history and to the documents of the Hebrew people its own magic word, a word potent in so many departments—"evolution." The thought represented by that popular word has been found to have real meaning in our investigations regarding the religious life and theological beliefs of Israel. To admit that is one thing—and it is often admitted in a half-hearted, superficial way; to realize and assimilate it is a different thing that, here as elsewhere, implies a living process. Men are glad to find one keyword which seems to unlock the secrets of the world, and there is no need to condemn too harshly such gladness as it reflects, if even in a crude way, the desire to realize the unity of things and to express the living principle which lies behind all life. We cordially confess that, when construed in a living, intelligent manner, the word "evolution" has been found full of helpful suggestions, and has embraced many elements of living truth; but we are not prepared to make a fetish of it, or to recognize it as an exhaustive and final word. Our Puritan forefathers had another word which to them was quite as important and equally dear—the word "election." That, too, was a great word, speaking of the supremacy of the living God, who orders the world in wisdom and judges the nations in righteousness. They also were severely logical and pressed their favorite word with inexorable consistency, and sacrificed, in theory at least, aspects of the truth which we are compelled to make prominent. Modern criticism places us in a position to realize how in this particular case the truths expressed in words apparently so opposite can be gathered up into a fuller conception of that divine life which manifests itself in the processes of human development, as in the career of a comparatively insignificant people we find such true and growing revelation of the God in whom "we live and move and have our being." Speaking from personal experience, the present writer can say that when the history and literature of Israel are construed in the most radical fashion that can be justified

by a really scientific procedure, the impression is deepened that the very process which brings out the *evolution* most clearly shows at the same time the reality of the *election*. If we admit that the Jews of later days in handling the history of their past carried into ancient times the forms of their own day, we must admit also that their treatment of this history was ideally true, and the most unsparing criticism justifies it to this extent that, unless we are skeptical in the strictest sense of the word, and find no divine meaning at all in the world, we must confess that these people were called of God to a great religious vocation, and have filled with some degree of faithfulness a God-given mission. A learned divine once denounced the modern reconstruction of this history as involving a very terrible thing, namely that which he styles, in a dangerously smart phrase, "the inspiration of repainting history." This church dignitary was not a specialist in Old Testament studies, and had his philosophic insight been equal to his learning in other directions, he might have known that there is no painting which is not to some extent repainting; no artist paints a picture of the past without being deeply influenced by the forms of his own time as well as by the peculiarities of his individual life. If that is true today, when we have succeeded so largely in developing the "historical sense," and when we make such strenuous, conscious efforts after a proper perspective, how much more true was it in ancient times, when men did not draw so clearly the distinction between fact and fiction, history and poetry! Then as to "inspiration," that pertains to the spirit and not to the mere outward form, and we may gratefully remember that, if it is really present, no criticism can destroy it, for criticism, which simply means intelligent study, is an attempt to find the eternal spirit embodied in these ancient forms.

III.

This brings us to consider briefly the mediating nature of criticism. By this we do not mean what has been properly called mediating or apologetic criticism. There has, of course, been such a thing as consciously mediating criticism undertaken in the spirit of compromise, and seeking to select the best from

conflicting views. There has also been, especially of late, popular apologetics in this department. This follows the path of least resistance and seeks to rob biblical criticism of the terror that it awakens in timid souls, by presenting the results which are most attractive and which can be most easily assimilated. We are not now discussing these more or less legitimate forms of activity, but maintain that pure criticism, considered as a large impersonal movement prompted by the scientific interest apart from the peculiarities of particular critics, has been a great mediating force. We must try, then, briefly to indicate the scope and meaning of this statement.

First as to the whole book, or collection of books. If we may be allowed to speak broadly of the opinions of men, and neglect the special case of those who were gifted with insight and were the pioneers of literary criticism, we may say that in the eighteenth century two irreconcilable views confront each other and engage in rude conflict. The rationalistic view regarded the Old Testament as consisting of worthless fables and legends, unreliable histories, and a few fine pieces of poetry or oratory. If the book had any value at all, it was because it did occasionally clothe in picturesque forms the commonplace conventional morality which was declared to be as old as creation. Over against this stood the strictly orthodox view of a sacred document, each word of which was inspired, and whose chief value was in the evidence for the supernatural to be drawn from detailed predictions of future events, especially in the circumstantial descriptions of the Messiah and his work given centuries before his appearance. The Old Testament was the New Testament in type; the external things were different, but the internal things the same; or that which was implicit in the Old was explicit in the New. This was certainly superior to the rationalistic view, as the positive construction, even if imperfect, is better than mere negation; and the orthodox dogma did at least recognize the organic connection between the old and the new. Criticism, pursuing its steady course, has not completely justified either of these opposing views, but has enabled us to recognize, in a way not possible a hundred years ago, the truth

that was in both of them. On the one side, it has proved that these ancient records are not histories, in the modern sense of that term, but that they contain valuable material for the construction of an important chapter in the life of the ancient world; it has furnished a sympathetic appreciation of the limited yet varied literary forms through which prophets and poets appeal to us; and as physical science turns to highest uses apparently worthless things, so biblical criticism has rescued for the student of religions as well as for the preacher treasures which keen-minded men had consigned too hastily to the rubbish heap. On the other side, criticism has fully recognized the organic connection between Christianity and Judaism, but it has not favored the crude theory of verbal inspiration, and has treated with scant courtesy the mechanical view of types; it has not found the favorite phrase "implicit and explicit" able to do full justice to the situation. Instead of a book containing all Christian dogmas in mysterious forms, it gives us a study of real development, from a simple beginning, through the action and reaction of many living forces; it is a complex drama, in which, in what it falls short of as well as in what it achieves, the past stretches out pathetic pleading hands for the great gift of God that is still to be revealed.

The same mediating influence may be traced in exegesis, that is, in the explanation of particular passages or texts; there was a rude opposition between a vulgar literalism and an extravagant allegorical interpretation, and this could only be harmonized by a historical method which recognized the principle of development, and by a real literary interpretation which is able to do full justice to the passionate oratory of the prophets and the varying moods of the poets. It is said to be one danger of the present method that it is so microscopic, that it subjects every word and phrase to such minute critical examination. This, of course, is a danger if the detailed research is not illuminated and guided by general principles which bring the smallest part into vital relation with the whole. The microscope is not a dangerous instrument, in biology or biblical criticism, if it is used intelligently. Until this new method was wrought out, literalism

and allegorism had to fight a battle in which neither side could understand the other. The contrast and contradiction could only be solved by a principle that had not then been clearly grasped. There will always remain "the personal equation;" the matter-of-fact or the quick poetic disposition will, here as elsewhere, continue to exert an influence; but, in general, we may say that the fanciful fashion of tearing biblical phrases from their context and making them say something that the original writer never dreamed of is more unjustifiable than ever, because in most cases there is a fair chance of getting at the principle embodied in the history, prophecy, or song in such a way that we can apply it powerfully to our modern life. The allegorical method no doubt had its uses in enabling some of the great ancient thinkers to solve the exegetical problems of their own age, but in its best days it was liable in weak hands to run into the wildest extravagances, and it is disappointing to find the editor of a leading English religious journal defending the allegorical method and disclaiming "obscurantism" at the same time. The minister who is prepared to give some real study to his preparatory work is not now shut up to a false literalism or an absurd allegory. He may learn how the great religious thinkers of the Hebrew race looked out upon life, and fought its battle in such a spirit that their words inspire and strengthen us.

IV.

It is not possible to sum up in a few words the results of such long and varied toil, but we may briefly mention two lines of special importance: first, the solution of the Pentateuch problem; and, secondly, the restoration of the prophet. In connection with the books which are associated with the name of Moses there are, no doubt, still many questions remaining, and much room for the investigation of historical problems; but unless biblical criticism is a delusion, and the work of a century utterly in vain, the main lines of this subject have been correctly marked out, and the books which have caused so much trouble to earnest students have ceased to be merely a perplexing puzzle, and have become a rich treasury for the historian and

student of religions, as well as for the preacher. The clever people who say smart things about "the mistakes of Moses" or declare that the Old Testament is "the millstone of Christianity" do not frighten us now; they are only playing on the surface of things, and have not grasped the real nature of the problem, as it presents itself to reverent, serious students. When the different sections of these ancient books are studied in their proper order, they reveal to us the different stages of a living process, that process which must always be interesting and instructive, because it concerns the highest life, namely, the growth of a great nation in the knowledge of God and righteousness.

Further, careful study has restored the prophet to his proper place by showing that he was preëminently a preacher whose message was addressed to his own age, and that this has become a perennial message by the very power that made it so appropriate and searching at the time—the power of insight into moral principles, faithfulness to fact, and loyalty to God. If it is true that this view of the prophet was never completely lost, and that the Puritans of three or four hundred years ago, engaged in similar battles, appreciated it more by reason of practical sympathy than historical learning, it is also true that the teaching given to young people on this subject thirty or forty years ago left the impression that the prophet was mainly concerned with predicting the distant future, and that he was specially created to fill a prominent place in a system of apologetics. The great prophets stand before us now more noble and inspiring than ever before. We know how they are to be distinguished from false, time-serving, conventional prophets; how in their own day they bore the cross, as they preached the righteousness of God and predicted doom for the wilfully wicked; how they constantly looked forward to that great day which by God's mercy often seems so near to the eye of faith, to that kingdom which is ever coming, but is never completely revealed or fully realized. We can understand, as we listen to their denunciation of shams and their plea for a purer humanitarianism or a nobler civic righteousness, how the modern scientist,

discontented with orthodox dogmas, could find in these preachers of righteousness the highest form of religious life; but, much as we reverence the prophets of Israel, we cannot think that they reached finality in religious teaching; their glory is rather that they prepared the way for a fuller revelation.

V.

What, then, remains after all this shaking? What does biblical science hand over to the twentieth century?

1. A great literature which has grown rather than shrunk under the fires of criticism. Instead of books written by a few men, we have a great literature into which a numberless host of living souls have poured their noblest thoughts and purest aspirations. In the main, and for the great body of general readers, this book belongs to what is called the "literature of power;" that is, its chief service is in keeping alive great religious ideas, and inspiring men in their struggle, not only with evil, but also with prosaic fact and dead routine. Even from this point of view the book has become larger rather than smaller. The idea of revelation, somewhat mechanically concerned, had pressed into the background the thought of a literature which mirrors the life of man and reflects the guidance of God. Recently the idea of literature has been emphasized, and, instead of looking on every page for the same few dogmas, we seek in the varied literary forms for manifestations of the life of men who are eager in the search for truth and God. These two ideas must be reconciled by the recognition that it is through the life of man thus reflected or embodied that the divine revelation comes to us. Without lessening the spiritual power, science has shown how to the special student it may also be a book of instruction and contribute its share to the history of the past.

2. Hence there remains an important series of documents for those who wish to know how Christianity grew out of Judaism, and in what way the religion which we now love and seek to live has its roots in experiences so different and distant. How did there come forth from such an intensely national religion a faith that is purely spiritual and knows no distinction of clan or race?

That must always be an interesting problem, and it has lost none of its importance. It is a startling change when out of the heart of narrow Judaism there springs a religion spiritual in its nature and universal in its range. This, we shall see, was not so sudden as it seems; not without long, slow, gradual preparation involving much discipline of national life and individual experience. This leads us to take a scholarly interest in books not included in the Jewish canon, and it shows us that there are no "silent centuries," but that we must take a larger view of this history, if we are to understand the glorious saying that God, who in sundry times and divers manners spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his son.

3. A great book for the preacher still remains, with its historical pictures, varied biographies, and sacred poems. Certain parts of the book were lost to the preacher, for a while; that is, to the preacher who possessed something of the scientific spirit and was troubled with an "exegetical conscience." The old view was lost, and the new one not fully appropriated; a transitional period always has its difficulties. But many have now worked themselves through into a position where they can do justice to the demands of science without being unfaithful to the practical needs of religion. From the point of view of concrete, picturesque, powerful preaching, it is most important that the Old Testament should not be neglected in the pulpit. In recent years, as the effect of influences coming from various directions, the social side of the religious life has been emphasized. With this, of course, a true individualism and a deeper view of the personal life must be combined; but the individualism cannot be restored in precisely the old form; the preacher must now insist upon the relationship of man to man; religion must be a force inspiring social purity and civic righteousness. Here the prophets and teachers of Israel are near to us, though they seem so far away; their message was in the main to society, and it is a message that we can adapt to our own day. This needs wisdom as well as courage, intelligence as well as fervor; but it is a high task worthy of the true preacher who honors God and is

sympathetic toward men. If we will base ourselves upon that which is best in the past, if we will use wisely the results of all this painful, conscientious toil, then in the new century the Old Testament need be neither a sealed book nor a neglected book, but may take, more and more, its rightful place as one of God's ministering servants, bringing light, joy, and peace to many struggling souls.

A Meditation.

Luke 7: 34. "The Son of man is come eating and drinking."

Christ seems here in a word to suggest a liberty of action as yet uncomprehended, and a side of mission work as yet unclaimed.

The naturalness of all ordinary social life belonging to God, rather than leading away, or only permitted by him; the obliteration of the words "secular" and "religious," and the substitution for them of "direct" and "indirect;" the breadth and beauty of a life so rich in vitality and truthfulness that it claimed all normal desires for itself—all these are suggested in Christ's statement of himself: "The Son of man came eating and drinking."

Luke 10: 40. "'Lord, bid her [Mary] therefore that she help me;' and the Lord answered, '. . . but one thing is needful.'"

Martha's extreme busy-ness had not been rebuked by Jesus. For the activity with her was not, in truth, direct neglect of spiritual privileges for temporal comforts, but, instead, solicitous care for creature comforts was to her the measure of personal devotion and spiritual interest. Had she done her work silently, Jesus therefore would not have spoken.

But when her form of service became, not only the demonstration of her own devotion, but the measure or test of another's, Jesus gently reminded her that only one thing was needful—love to him.